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Fashioning a Career

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At a time when female entrepreneurs were rare, Carrie Taylor made dresses, and money, in Bowling Green.

Fashioning a Career

By Sandra L. Staebell

In Carrie Taylor's era, women were expected to focus their ambitions on finding good husbands, running their own households, and rearing children. So Carrie Taylor did all that—and still found time to become a famously successful entrepreneur, running a flourishing Bowling Green dressmaking business for nearly forty years. The garments made under the Taylor name were as recognizable in her time as designer fashions are today. Decades after Taylor's death a former customer recalled, "I could always spot a 'Taylor-made' costume and never hesitated to speak to the lady wearing it when on my travels."

Caroline "Carrie" Taylor was born in Warren County on April 1, 1855, the third child of Thomas L. and Sarah D. Hampton Burnam. Taylor's father worked as a merchant and steamboat clerk, and her upbringing in Bowling Green was likely modest and conventional for its day. Her hometown was typical of most small Kentucky towns—a place that offered churches, newspapers, secret societies, confectioneries, oyster parlors, saloons, drugstores, and blacksmith shops. There was nothing about this environment to suggest it would produce a woman of such an enterprising turn of mind.

Carrie Burnam Taylor: This carte de visite was probably taken before she married Aaron Taylor.

Little is known about Taylor's education. According to a contemporary biographical sketch, she graduated in 1877 from Cedar Bluff College, a primary and secondary school in nearby Woodburn. At a time when few public schools existed in Kentucky, hundreds of girls and young women attended female academies and seminaries around the state in the hope of attaining some semblance of an education. They often studied Latin, trigonometry, physical geography and grammar, but also routinely took painting, drawing and music. Most students were pointed towards marriage rather than careers, and acquiring polish in social settings was usually far more important than any formal education they received.

The precise origins of Carrie Taylor's career are uncertain. A popular theory holds that she advised her fellow students at Cedar Bluff College on matters of dress, although her name does not appear on any of the known alumnae rolls. More than 35 years after she reportedly graduated in 1877, a magazine

Potter College: The students of the Pleasant J. Potter College for Young Women were a marketing boon for the Taylor Company, which they continued to patronize after they retuned to their homes throughout the South and Southwest.

article attributed Carrie's career to a reputation among her friends for knowing how to dress. What is known is that she married Aaron H. Taylor in 1879, and the couple had two children, William (b. 1880) and Louise (b. 1882). One year after their marriage, Aaron was working as a clerk in a dry goods store but did not make enough to establish his own household. The couple lived with her parents early in their marriage.

Taylor, like many women of her era, probably made her own clothing and gradually began sewing for individuals outside her immediate family. Her entry in E. Polk Johnson's *History of Kentucky and Kentuckians* (1912) supports this notion, stating that Taylor became involved in a dressmaking business in Bowling Green in 1880. Six years later, Aaron was earning enough money as a traveling salesman for the couple to maintain their own household. Carrie's business was so small, however, that it was not listed in the 1886-87 Bowling Green City and Business Directory.

Although most women in the dressmaking trade were unmarried or widowed, Carrie's decision to work after her marriage was not unprecedented. Thirty-five women from Warren County listed dressmaker as their occupation on the 1880 Federal Census. Of them, three were married, ten resided with a parent, four lived with a family member other than a parent or spouse, nine boarded with someone outside their family, and ten headed their own households. Thirty-four of these women were white, and one was a mulatto who lived in Jonesville, a small, unincorporated community on the southern edge of Bowling Green. Two of them were born in Ireland, and the rest were native born.

The establishment in 1889 of the Pleasant J. Potter College for Young Women in Bowling Green proved to be a great boon to Carrie Taylor's business, as fashion always seems to be an issue with young ladies. Under the category of "Dress," several school catalogs stated that "boarding students should be required to conform to the uniform dress, consisting of hat, wrap, and dress approved by the school. To insure uniformity, perfect fit, and good taste, these suits will be designed in our city by one of the best modistes of the country at the approximate cost of $25." It is probable that Mrs. Taylor was the dressmaker to whom the catalog referred.

The use of "modiste" in Potter College catalogs is interesting because it was a term associated with highly skilled dressmakers and milliners. The fact that it was applied to a dressmaker from a relatively small southern town is significant because fashion-conscious American women looked abroad for their clothing cues, and establishments such as the House of Worth in Paris designed garments for wealthy American women. Mrs. Taylor clearly wanted clients to associate her garments with the latest French fashions.

Not only did Potter College students purchase their uniforms from Mrs. Taylor; they also bought party gowns, graduation dresses and wedding trousseaus. After graduation, the school's alumnae continued to order clothing and

referred female friends and family to the business. The presence of students from Cartersville, Georgia, Nashville, Tennessee, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Monroe, Louisiana, and Arlington, Texas in the Class of 1906 shows how Taylor's potential client base extended throughout the South and Southwest, forming the foundation for the phenomenal growth of her business.

Interviews have confirmed the close ties between Potter College students, their relatives, and Mrs. Taylor's clothing. Texas resident "Bessie" Avery Taft, Class of 1907, served as President of the Hypation Literary Society, Editor in Chief of the *Green and Gold,* and President of the Senior Class. She also apparently shared a love of fashion with her mother. When asked if Bessie ever mentioned buying clothing from Mrs. Taylor, her daughter recalled that Grandfather Taft said Bessie attended "Dr. Potter's College so that his wife could have frequent trips to Mrs. Taylor's shop."

Taylor used unique methods to market her business. She kept in touch with existing customers by mailing seasonal fashion announcements from New York or European cities twice a year. Engraved on heavy stock, the elegant advertisements featured the company logo and an elaborate monogram. Some of them featured a poem while others encouraged customers to place orders in anticipation of the approaching fashion season. Although no written records exist, one contemporary account states that Taylor's mailing list included 24,000 names.

In addition to reaching current clients, the engraved announcements had an additional benefit, as mail bearing postmarks from New York, London, Edinburgh or Paris must surely have generated considerable interest in small towns throughout the South and Southwest. The informal networks that operated in these communities increased her name recognition and probably led to first time orders from new customers.

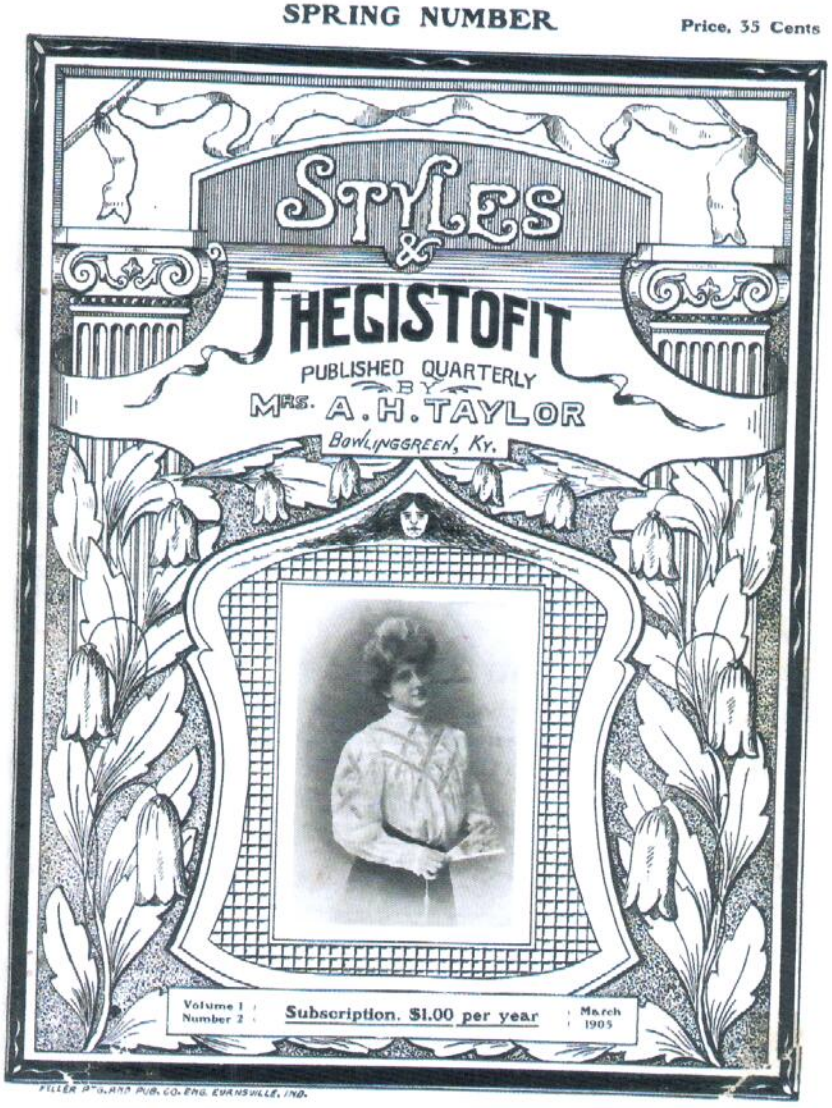
Taylor's semiannual buying trips were quite important to the business, as they allowed her to keep abreast of the latest fashions and acquire materials not easily available in Kentucky. Former employees recalled using large quantities of domestic fabrics from New York City, woolens and tweeds purchased in London and Edinburgh, silks and velvets bought in Paris, and buttons and trimmings acquired in Germany.

In 1904 Mrs. Taylor launched *Styles & Thegistofit,* a magazine whose mission was to:

> "…fill a need that is not to be met by any of the magazines we know of. A magazine devoted to fashion plates, notes and descriptions only, these to be of the class that usually are confined to expensive dressmakers and dressmaking establishments, at a rate within reach of all and in style and manner practical for all."

A year's subscription cost $1, and individual issues could be purchased for thirty-five cents.

Drumming up business for the company was the main goal of the first issue. It promoted garments made at the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company, included fashion plates for paper patterns from the Vogue Pattern Company, and advertised one of her company's signature services, the bridal trousseau. Women like Potter



Short-lived: Launched in November 1904, this second (and last) issue of *Styles & Thegistofit* was published in March, 1905.

Blue serge dress: Mrs. Ibbie Beard Allen of Bowling Green wore this dress, made around 1906.

College graduate Nelle Gooch of Simpson County purchased their wedding dresses from Mrs. Taylor, and, in an innovative example of coordinated bridal planning, also ordered their invitations through the firm.

A second issue of *Styles & Thegistofit* appeared in March 1905. The business plan called for expanding the magazine to four issues per year, but the publication folded, reportedly after the bank holding the funds, probably P. J. Potter's Sons of Bowling Green, failed.

In April 1914 Taylor was one of thirteen women profiled in the article, "The Feminist Movement That Cashes In." Printed in *Munsey's Magazine*, the story cited Taylor for "possessing that rather rare feminine talent known as 'clothes sense.'" Author Edward Hungerford was generous with his praise, an indication that she had mastered the art of public relations on the road to becoming a successful entrepreneur.

> "It is not every business head—man or woman—who can sleep two nights in a Pullman car, arrive in New York at daybreak, invest anywhere from $100,000 to a quarter of a million dollars in raw materials and start on the long trip home again after twelve hours steady shopping."

Mrs. Taylor's attention to detail was important at a time when patterns were often inaccurately sized and pattern-drafting systems were frequently inadequate and difficult to use. Top dressmakers drafted patterns specific to individual customers and used the "draped and pinned to fit or form" method, a process that involved draping the material on the customer, pinning the various adjustments, and requiring the client to submit to multiple fittings. Three fittings were the rule for Taylor-made clothing, and different employees fitted specific parts of the garment. If a client lived out of town, an employee who had similar measurements substituted for the customer. Taylor's business advertised that it could complete a garment in three to ten working days.

Bowling Green resident Kate Duncan gave her Taylor-made clothing an enthusiastic endorsement. "What a joy! When you tried your dress on there was nothing to do! Nothing to be lengthened—nothing to be tightened. Every hook and eye was in place. When Mrs. Taylor made you a dress, she made you a dress!"

And if you couldn't shop in person, the Taylor Company was only too happy to send samples upon request. On April 27, 1892, Mrs. J. E. Grace of Bowling Green, Kentucky wrote:

> "Mrs. Taylor: you sent me only one sample of organdie. I am real anxious to have an organdie and want to get it ready made from you, but wish a light blue garment with a darker blue figure. I would not object to the figure having other colors in it. Please send me samples of some with prices also of the organdie right away, as we will need the dresses by the middle of next month."

Mail order customers were encouraged to specify a color choice and price range. Terms such as "Cheap" and "Low-priced" were, Taylor informed her customers, "indefinite and prove poor guides." Lillian Daniel of Murray, Kentucky partially followed instructions in her letter dated April 27, 1892.

> "Mrs. Taylor. Please make my dress as soon as you possibly can as I am needing it badly. I leave everything to your taste. Haven't any suggestion to make only I don't like very much trimming. I'd rather not pay over $9.00 for making lining and what trimming as you think needs as I want another dress later."

Extant correspondence and sample cards indicate that customers sometimes sent their own material or asked Taylor

to remake old garments. Although Mrs. Taylor undoubtedly preferred making all choices regarding fabrics and trimmings, business was business, so she did not turn away such trade. On February 20, 1892 Mrs. Seth Bullock wrote:

". . . by today's Express, goods for a dress for a miss of 14 yrs. Make it in any style you think suitable for a girl of that age and add anything you think necessary for trimming."

Like any business, the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company sometimes had trouble collecting its overdue accounts. On July 8, 1895, Aaron Taylor wrote employee Josephine Calvert asking her to pay attention to such troubling matters.

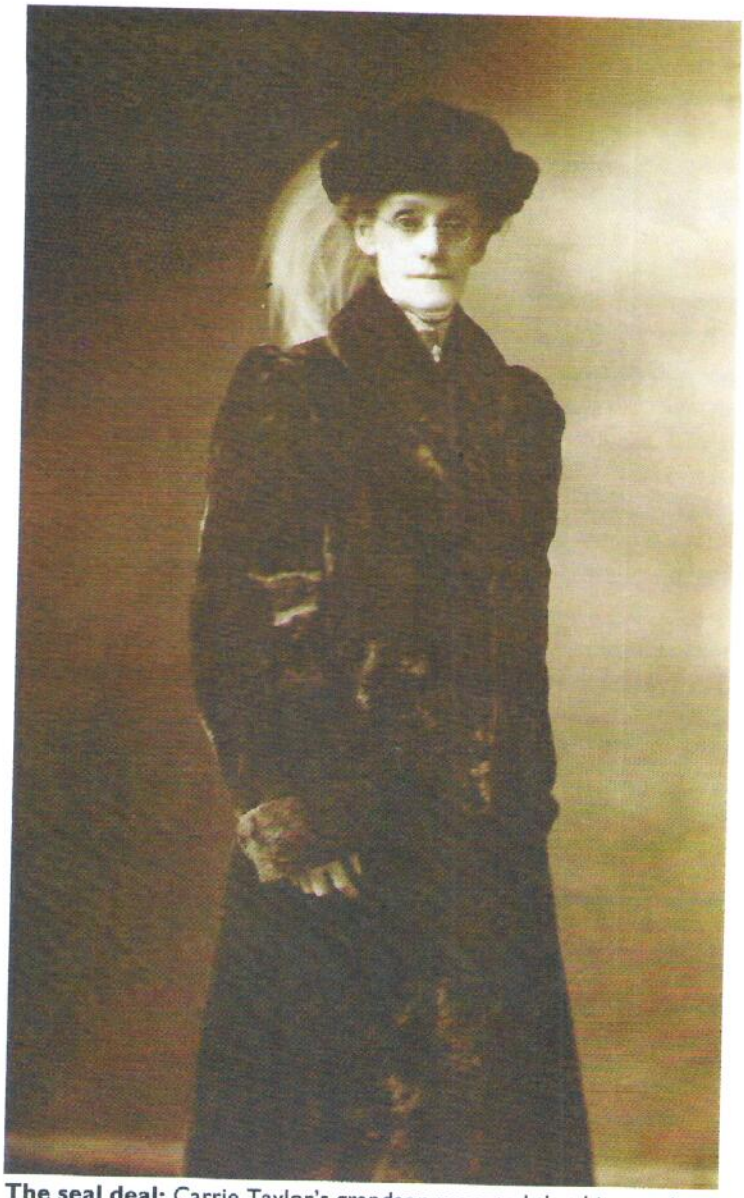
"I assume Carrie gave you all the instructions necessary relative to accounts uncollected, etc. But I want to impress the necessity of you urging every one to settle their bills at once. I would suggest that you say on your statement that it is both urgent and important they remit by return mail . . . especially Prof. Cabell and Prof. Taylor."

Collecting unpaid accounts was a significant enough problem that at some point Mrs. Taylor began asking customers to supply references and pay 50% down in advance. This policy may have been adopted in response to letters such as the one a resident of Forest City, Arkansas, wrote on February 22, 1892.

"Dear Mrs. Taylor. Please excuse my not writing to you sooner. I have not forgotten that I owe you a balance of $14.15. Please do not be uneasy about it. I have no money on hand at present but will have some, about the 10th of next month (March) when I will positively pay you. I thank you very much for waiting on me so long. I hope this will be satisfactory to you. Yours Respectfully, Mrs. J. W. Bard"

Although collecting some accounts proved troublesome, the business thrived in the new century. The Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company was incorporated in 1902 with a capital stock of $20,000. One year later, it purchased land in the 800 block of State Street in Bowling Green for $5,000. The first floor of its factory was divided into a reception area, workroom, Taylor's office, two fitting rooms, and main shop area, which probably resembled a dry goods store. The upstairs was used primarily to prepare sample cards for mail order customers. One feature of the reception area was an area where young girls could sew remnants and scraps of cloth into doll clothing while their mothers picked out fabrics or underwent fittings.

Factory floor: The Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company employed as many as 280 women who worked ten-hour shifts six days a week. In 1905–1907, wages averaged $5.78 a week. When Mrs. Taylor got upset and her dentures started clicking, the smart worker stayed out of her way.



The seal deal: Carrie Taylor's grandson reported that his grandmother was very proud of her full-length seal coat. She left an estate estimated at $250,000.

As was common in factories of the time, the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company operated on the principle of division of labor with employees assigned to specific tasks. Work functions were arranged around several rows of sewing machines, and various tasks such as garment finishing were assigned to specific worktables. Electric sewing machines were difficult to use when first purchased. "They liked them after they got used to them, but they had an awful time learning," recalled former employee Zelma Wilkerson. "They'd run away with them!"

Company employees reported for work Monday through Saturday at 6:55 A.M., received a half-hour for lunch, had an afternoon snack break, and left at 5:00 P.M.. Although the workplace environment seems harsh by today's standards, the conditions probably resembled those of other factories across the Commonwealth. According to the *First Biennial Report of the Labor Inspector of Kentucky* (1903), the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company was open for business 11 months out of the year, workers labored ten hours per day, and night work sometimes occurred.

Former employees remembered a relatively congenial workplace. Several reminisced about Christmas parties while others remembered dispatching "errand girls" to buy pickles and other snacks from the grocer across the street. The workers generally liked Mrs. Taylor but knew when to stay out of her way. According to Zelma Wilkerson,

> "When she used to get kinda upset and she'd start her dentures clicking (pop, pop, pop) you could hear her from one end of the building to the other. She would purse up those lips and stomp up those stairs and fold her arms. She'd get after you for nothing then, so we'd all quiet down and pass it along. The boss is on a rampage!"

The number of employees fluctuated over time. According to a 1903 report, the company employed 236 workers—231 women including the forelady, and five girls. A 1905-07 payroll ledger indicates that a total of 260 women worked there over a three year period, although not all simultaneously. The 1910 Federal Census found that the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company, one of 102 businesses in Kentucky whose payroll numbered between 101 and 500 workers, employed 2% of the 9,485 female workers across the state. A study compiled during 1912-13 identified 2,515 female Kentuckians working in the clothing trades, 280 of whom worked for Mrs. Taylor.

Wages improved little over time. A 1903 report found adult female employees at the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company earned an average wage of $1.00 per day while girls earned $0.50. Between 1905 and 1907 weekly wages ran between $1.50 and $18.00, or an average of $5.78. A report commissioned by the Consumer League of Louisville in 1911 maintained that individuals needed to earn $6 per week to live at subsistence level. Two years later, seventy nine percent of adult female Kentuckians employed in the clothing trades earned $6 or more per week and 21% received less. By contrast, 80% of adult male workers were paid $10 or more per

week while 20% earned less. Clearly, most of Taylor's employees earned minimal wages at best, perhaps a result of the location of her company in a small town.

The Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company appears to have been a unique Kentucky institution for its time. The listings in Caron's Louisville directories provide some useful comparisons between the dressmaking trade in Louisville and what Mrs. Taylor accomplished in Bowling Green. Using 1878 and 1917 as starting and ending points, the number of dressmakers in Louisville who advertised their services rose from 132 practitioners in 1878 to 401 such tradeswomen 29 years later. The occupation reached its zenith in 1897 when 542 women officially practiced the trade. Most dressmakers were self-employed, although some worked with a partner, often a family member, and others were employed in small shops. They consistently listed their occupation as dressmaker, and only in rare instances did a woman advertise herself as a "modiste" or use the title of "Madame."

Caron's directories also document some of the more organized competition to Taylor's business. In 1903 Kaufman-Straus Company followed the example of many better department stores throughout the country by setting up an in-house dressmaking department for customers who desired more personalized attention. A year later, the Stewart Dry Goods Company opened its own dressmaking salon, called the New York Store. The New York Store closed in 1915, while Kaufman-Straus's salon lasted until 1926.

The financial health of Taylor's company apparently remained sound well into the second decade of the 20th century. In 1913, it mailed out 16,000 announcements in honor of Mrs. Taylor's 35th anniversary in the dressmaking business. One year later, an article in *Munsey's Magazine* put the size of the company mailing list at 24,000 names.

A contract during World War I to make clothing for the United States Army apparently benefited the company. In an undated letter to his daughter Louise, Aaron Taylor wwrote,

> "As the government contract has been completed, Revival over, I feel that there is nothing in the immediate future to keep one so completely occupied as I have been for the past six months. I am glad to tell you that we made some money out of our contract."

Today, one cannot help but speculate that his use of the phrase "Revival over" is an indicator that the company was starting to experience financial difficulties, even if Taylor failed to recognize it. In the same letter, Aaron also commented that his wife was spending less time at the business, a fact that boded ill for the company's long term prospects.

Carrie Taylor died on April 24, 1917, of complications caused by acute dilation of the heart with bronchial asthma listed as a contributory cause. Her death dealt a devastating blow to the company because its success was built on her fashion sense and ability to anticipate customers' needs. Afterward, the owners of Kaufman-Straus reportedly offered $100,000 for the business, but the Taylor family passed on the offer, perhaps due to the acrimony surrounding the settling of Mrs. Taylor's estate. The death three years later of William Taylor, the company treasurer, undoubtedly also had a negative impact on the business.

Other factors led to the demise of the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company. The closure of the Pleasant J. Potter College for Young Women in 1909 must have been an initial blow. The immediate impact was the loss of school-age customers who required uniforms and party dresses, but the long-term consequences were far worse. Once the school closed, the referral system that spread the Taylor name throughout the South gradually ceased to function.

Trends in technology and the clothing industry also had an impact on the business. By the end of the nineteenth century, many Americans could afford the sewing machines that were readily available from mail order houses such as Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. More accurate graded patterns and improved pattern-drafting systems also lessened the need for women to order clothing from skilled dressmakers. This was the beginning of a process that some fashion historians refer to as the "democratization of clothing."

"When Mrs. Taylor made you a dress, she made you a dress!"

Most important, changes in the basic construction and design of fashion gradually eliminated the need for women to hire dressmakers. During the 1870s and 1880s, clothing was constructed from vast quantities of fabric sewn in a rather complicated arrangement that included tapes, pleats, ruching (trimming), and gathers. Many women did not possess the sewing skills essential to getting a correct fit. The 1890s, however, saw the advent of the shirtwaist and skirt, a silhouette that lent itself to home sewing and the manufacturing techniques needed to mass-produce women's ready-to-wear. The silhouette of one-piece dresses also relaxed after 1910. As time went on, more and more women adopted these styles.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, mail order houses, dry

Wedding Finery: The Robertson–Hagerman nuptials, held November 12, 1896 at the Main Street Baptist Church in Bowling Green, featured Taylor-made dresses.

goods establishments and department stores in cities and towns across the South offered ready-to-wear for women, promoting its quality and ease of purchase through advertisements placed in home town newspapers. Women finally had access to reasonably priced and accurately sized manufactured clothing. Customers now had little incentive to order custom-made clothing, and Taylor's business declined. The Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company closed its doors sometime after 1927.

Carrie Taylor was a remarkable woman who made a notable, if largely forgotten, contribution to the history of Kentucky. At its height, the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company had no significant competitors in the Commonwealth, and for nearly forty years held its own against hundreds of self-employed seamstresses and dressmakers as well as scores of dry goods emporia and department stores. At the time of her death, no Kentucky firm matched the reputation enjoyed by "the Establishment," an honorific still used to refer to the Mrs. A. H. Taylor Company. "When Mrs. Taylor made you a dress, she made you a dress!" ◆

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A Note on Sources

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